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ABSTRACT

Interest in assessment of young children increased after readiness testing abuses in the 1980s. The pressure of demonstrating educational accountability through children's standardized test performance increased the use of skills-driven curricula. It also created an inappropriate learning environment in which readiness tests were used to remove from the classroom children who could not meet the inappropriately high standards. Legitimate purposes for early childhood assessment include educational planning and communication with parents, identifying children with special needs, and program evaluation and accountability. Assessment instruments should be matched to the type of information needed. Portfolio assessment is gaining popularity among educators and appears to be well matched to developmentally appropriate early childhood programs. As a purposeful collection of student work illustrating effort and progress in given areas, portfolios allow teachers to observe development, evaluate the curriculum, determine efficacy of teaching practices, and facilitate faculty discussion. They provide an avenue for student self-evaluation, goal-setting, and learning opportunities. Establishing guidelines for portfolio inclusion highlights the learning goals. However, there are problems in using portfolios, including inconsistent reliability and validity of portfolio scores. Contents for a preschoolers' portfolio will vary from those used in elementary school. The portfolio is best organized chronologically according to developmental areas. Children should be allowed to examine work samples and contribute to portfolio selection. Evaluation criteria provide the framework for thinking about student performance and clarify instructional goals. Systematic observation is important for collecting information for preschoolers' portfolios. (KDFB)

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Developmentally Appropriate Assessment of Young Children:

The Role of Portfolio Assessments

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Background of Testing

The origins of modern day student testing began in 1905 in France with Alfred Binet's development of a test to place Paris schoolchildren in appropriate classes (Cohen, Swerdlik & Phillips). Testing students began as an attempt to sort them into categories to determine who should receive high-level training consistent with fixed and innate high or low "capacities". This nativist assumption was popular in the 1930's and had the unfortunate consequence of identifying disadvantaged and minority students as unready and unable to learn, excluding them from school when they needed it most. During this time, that IQ tests were believed to accurately measure innate ability, unconfounded by prior learning experiences. Therefore, the children who were deemed to have low ability were sent home to the same environments that did not prepare them to perform well on the original readiness measures (Shepard, 1994).

Another wave of interest in the assessment of young children developed after widespread abuse of readiness testing in the 1980's. The pressure of demonstrating educational accountability through children's performance on standardized tests changed how teachers taught and what children studied (Meisels, 1993). There was a large shift in teaching practices oriented to a skills-driven curriculum with accompanying accountability testing. The standardized accountability testing in higher grades produced a trickle down effect of a skills driven kindergarten curriculum, creating inappropriate learning environments and practices for young children. In response to this trickle down, or pushed down, curriculum children could not meet the developmentally inappropriate high standards and many schools began readiness testing to exclude some of them

from attending kindergarten. Thus, readiness testing removed young children from developmentally inappropriate, skills driven, instructional programs (Shepard, 1994). The more reasonable response to the implementation of a skills driven curriculum at earlier and earlier ages would have been to change the curriculum and assessment practices based on developmental appropriatness.

Technical and conceptual problems with standardized readiness tests are numerous. In addition, using standardized readiness tests can have profound consequences: waiting a year to enroll in kindergarten, being retained in kindergarten, or being placed in a two-year kindergarten program. These "solutions" create a disruption in a child's life based solely on readiness measures that do not have sufficient reliability or validity to warrant such decisions (Shepard, 1994).

If traditional standardized assessments are so inappropriate for young children, why test at all? There are three legitimate purposes for assessment in early childhood programs:

1. Educational planning and communication with parents,
2. Identifying children with special needs, and
3. Program evaluation and accountability (Hills, 1993).

Appropriate assessment requires teachers to discover what children can, and can not do, which fosters teaching to address children's needs. Children and families need to know if the child's time is well spent and if the foundation for future success is being laid. Teachers need good assessments to determine children's developmental levels and how children are responding to teaching practices. Administrators need good assessments to determine whether or not the educational program is contributing to children's development. Policymakers and taxpayers need good assessments to assure them that funds expended are worthwhile investments. (Scheinhart,

1993).

Shepard (1994) describes the following principles to be followed to insure appropriate assessment of young children: assessment should bring about benefits for children, or data should not be collected; the content of assessment should reflect or model progress toward important learning goals; the methods of assessment should be appropriate to the development and experiences of young children; and assessments should be tailored to a specific purpose, but not to sort, sift, or label children.

Tailoring assessment to a specific purpose requires that the instrument is matched with the type of information needed. The level of technical accuracy needed also dictates the type of assessment tool used. For example, there is little room for error when testing for a suspected disability. The type of services provided for a child with special needs may rest on the test results, therefore a high degree of reliability and validity are needed and norm-referenced data is needed. Assessments that are used to guide instruction need to relate to the curriculum and must be a valid indicator of the goals and objectives of early childhood education, but they do not need to provide norm-referenced comparisons. The Northwest Regional Laboratory (1991) and Southern Early Childhood Association (SECA, 1994) characterize appropriate assessment as: measuring multiple dimensions of child development, encompassing the whole child; implemented as an ongoing process, continuous over time; generating data useful for instructional improvement; taking place in a natural setting, including observations of student behavior; using a variety of the child's natural response modes and a variety of methods; and providing information that can be shared with parents. Assessments must also be free of cultural or gender bias.

In 1989, as part of Educate America 2000, the President and nation's governors announced "readiness" as the first education goal. In order to avoid inappropriate practices, the Technical Planning subgroup issued statements about what early childhood assessment must not be. It should not be called a measure of "readiness" as if some children are not ready to learn and it should not be used to "label," stigmatize or classify any one child or a group of children (Shepard, 1994).

In many instances, assessment over a long period of time has been used to find out what is wrong with a child. Assessment must also document the progress children make, their strengths, and the ways they learn and solve problems. Assessment will best serve young children when it is carried out as an integrated part of the curriculum, contributing positively to a child's self-esteem and developmental progress. It should recognize a child's individuality and respect the child's family and community background (Hills, 1993).

Portfolio Assessment: An Overview

Portfolio assessment is one of the alternative authentic assessment forms gaining popularity among educators. It appears to have components well matched for developmentally appropriate early childhood programs. Portfolios were originated by artists and photographers who used them as a means of offering examples of their best work. The portfolio was a way for the professional to show authentic or real work they had done. Portfolios are now used in the classroom as a source of authentic demonstration or assessment of student learning. Authentic assessment is a "fairer more informative way to measure success than standardized tests and exams have been." (Case, 1994, p.46)

The (NWEA) Northwest Evaluation Association, a consortium of educators, explains that a portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of the student's efforts, progress, or achievement in given areas. In order to be considered a portfolio, the collection must include student participation in selection of portfolio pieces, the guidelines for selection, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student reflection, (Arter and Spandel, 1992,). Defina (1992) emphasizes that portfolios should be systematic, purposeful, and meaningful collections of student's work and suggests there are many forms of portfolio assessment, each reflecting the way portfolios are shaped by the individual teachers and students using them. Arter and Spandel (1992,) add the following portfolio attributes: student reflection, criteria for judging merit, student participation in selection of pieces, and integration of assessment and instruction. Portfolios are not simply a storage place for a random selection of student work. "Purpose" transforms a folder of student work into a portfolio of reflections on goals and achievement. Portfolios both empower students and measure their achievement (Case, 1994).

There are a combination of student and teacher purposes for portfolio assessment. Portfolios allow students to demonstrate growth over time, provide a means for student self-evaluation, help students determine and set individual goals, and provide real-life learning opportunities. Portfolios allow teachers to observe language development across ages and cultures, to evaluate and develop the curriculum, to determine efficacy of teaching practices, and to facilitate faculty discussion about goals and means. They also empower teachers and provide support for making changes. In order to achieve purposefulness, student reflection is a necessary ingredient in the portfolio process. Purpose becomes the rationale for the selection of items. The student's reflections on the chosen selections make the portfolio a powerful instructional tool

(Defina, 1992).

Guidelines for selection of portfolio pieces determine what is placed in the portfolio. The guidelines establish what learning is to be explored, what the goals of the learning process are, and what selections best represent the articulated goals. According to Herman and Winters (1994, p.48) "well designed portfolios represent important, contextualized learning that requires complex thinking and expressive skills." If it is assumed a portfolio is a systematic compilation of a student's work, then it should reflect an ongoing process from the day-to-day learning activities of students. The student's efforts, progress, and achievement should be evident. Portfolio collections may result from input from students, teachers, parents, school, district, and national standards. Institutionalized portfolios are usually not advantageous because the empowerment is taken from the teacher and student. However, some institutionalized criteria may be helpful if it is relevant to student learning and supplements or replaces standardized testing. Two compelling considerations when deciding upon the content of portfolios are the owner's wishes and the purpose for collecting each item (Defina, 1992). A student empowering practice would be specifying categories of entries with students free to add pieces from each category (Arter & Spandel, 1992).

The use of portfolios as assessment devices is a systematic way to present the effort, growth, and achievement of the student. A debate over the technical quality of portfolios has developed between traditionalists in assessment and portfolio advocates who use them to design curriculum and instruction and do not care about technical characteristics such as reliability and validity (Herman & Winters, 1994). Undoubtedly, assessment information needs to provide accurate information in order for responsible decisions to be made. When used as an assessment

tool to make important decisions about students, schools, and school districts, the reliability and validity of portfolio assessment is essential. Reliability can be judged through interrater agreement. However, existing reliability data is inconsistent (Herman & Winters, 1994).

In addition to reliability, portfolio scores need to be a valid indicator of what is being assessed. Validity indicates that the instrument measures what it is intended to measure. Scores are valid when they correlate with other valued measures of the same capability. However, this depends on the existence of other valid measures for comparison. Reliability and validity become important issues when portfolio assessments are mandated for accountability purposes.

Overall, it appears using portfolios as assessment and/or accountability devices can lead to problems. Mandating portfolios on a systemwide or statewide basis may reduce the sense of control students have over their portfolios and inhibit their reflection on their learning (Case, 1994). Additionally, the work in the portfolio may not be representative of what the student knows and can do on a regular basis. The criteria used to critique the product may not reflect the most relevant or useful dimensions of the task, but may be the easiest to implement. There may be aspects of the portfolio process that make a student unable to demonstrate what he of she knows or can do and the conclusions drawn from the portfolio can be heavily influenced by the person doing the evaluation (Arter and Spandel,1992). Case (1994) suggests students receive one score based on performance level and another based on how well they achieve their own goals and understand their accomplishments.

Defina (1992) explains the difference between portfolio assessment and standardized testing. Portfolio assessment should occur in the child's natural environment, provide an opportunity for the student to demonstrate his/her strengths as well as weakness, and be ongoing,

providing multiple opportunities for observation and assessment on a particular task. It should also assess realistic and meaningful daily literacy tasks, invite the child to be reflective (metacognitive) about his/her work and knowledge, and invite parents to be reflective of the child's work and knowledge. Portfolios should encourage teacher-student conferencing and inform instruction and curriculum, thus, placing the child at center of the educational process. Portfolios show a variety of student outcomes that may be difficult to detect when using traditional norm-referenced assessments. Standardized assessment, on the other hand, is an unusual event in the life of the child. It asks the child to provide a singular desired response, provides a summary of the child's failures on certain tasks and provides little diagnostic information. Instead, it provides ranking information: how a child compares to his peers. It is a one-time snapshot of a student's ability, assessing artificial tasks, which may not be meaningful to the child. In addition, standardized testing provides parents with essentially meaningless and often frightening numerical data, reinforcing the idea that the curriculum rather than the child is the center of the educational process.

According to Meisel and Steele (1991), portfolios help integrate instruction and assessment, provide students, teachers, parents, administrators, and other decision-makers with essential information about children's progress and various classroom activities, enable children to participate in assessing their own work, and keep track of individual children's progress, thus, forming the basis for evaluating the quality of the child's overall performance.

Portfolios in the Early Childhood Classroom

Based on the premise that portfolio assessment is an appropriate assessment format to use with young children, a larger issue arises: what should be included in an early childhood as

opposed to school-age portfolio? Diffily & Fleege (1994) state that looking at a child's work collected over time reflects growth which is very valuable for parent teacher conferences. Specifically, portfolios should include a student's writing, drawing, number writing, and problem-solving exercises, logs of books read by students and parents, photos of noteworthy block constructions, notes or comments by the child about his/her own work or activities, copies of pages or journal entries (with invented spelling preserved), drawings or illustrations inspired by stories or music, tape recordings of children reading stories, both published ones and those they write or dictate themselves, stories which children dictate or write, and video recordings of special projects, events or performances. Additionally, portfolio components should include work samples, systematic observation, anecdotal records, checklists or inventories, rating scales and screening tests, and developmental scales (SECA, 1994).

The organization of the portfolio is best arranged according to time sequence and categories. Categories can be developmental areas such as: social, physical and cognitive development. An example of a portfolio format is: Art Activities (Fine Motor Development), Movement (Gross Motor Development), Math and Science Activities (Concept Development), Language and Literacy, Personal and Social Development (SECA, 1994). The organization of the portfolio should allow the viewer (parent, teacher, child) to see the work in the context of the child's experiences and growth.

The process of portfolio development is at least as important as the finished product. Teachers should invite the child to examine his or her work samples at least monthly and guide the child in selecting samples for their portfolio. Frequently, the samples will need to be photocopied so children may take home their original work if they desire. It is important to date work and

note the context of the children's work as it is completed. Collecting typical samples of work is as important as collecting best pieces. When collected over time, samples of children's work provide visible evidence of a child's development. But more importantly, they allow the child an opportunity to reflect on his or her development and growth in the learning process.

Evaluation criteria for portfolios may include a specified list of expectations concerning composition, disposition, evaluation and purpose (Defina, 1992,). The criteria provide a framework for thinking about student performance and include the clarification of instructional goals and expectations (Arter and Spandel, 1992,). The criteria can be used by the student as a guide in creating, understanding, and evaluating their work (Defina, 1992,). Criteria generally consist of lists of expected attributes. Students become part of the evaluation process by helping formulate evaluative criteria.

Systematic observation is also an important tool in collecting information about children. When observing children the teacher should have clear objectives for the observation. Children should be observed throughout the day: when they are playing alone, in small groups, large groups, and in a variety of circumstances. Effective classroom observation must be systematic, objective, selective, unobtrusive, and carefully recorded (Bertrand & Cebula, 1980). Systematic observation is best completed through the use of anecdotal records. Anecdotal records are factual, nonjudgmental observations of observed activity (Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, 1991). Direct quotes and descriptions of children's gestures and expressions are especially valuable. Teachers should not draw conclusions about children's behavior patterns from one or two anecdotal records but from a series of records collected over time (SECA, 1994).

A checklist or inventory is a simple tool for recording children's progress and may be a valuable portfolio component. The checklist or inventory should be based on instructional objectives and a developmental pattern associated with the skill being monitored. Teachers can use the information from checklists to verify observations without having to rely on memory. Typically, checklists are divided into different areas of development, such as language and motor skills. Although some checklists may require teachers to observe specific situations, frequently they can be used to observe children during regular classroom activities instead of artificial or contrived activities.

An effective and easy means of collecting information for portfolios is using interviews with children. Open-ended requests elicit samples of the child's expressive language ability (SECA, 1994). Parent interviews can also be a good source of information. Teachers can learn about a child's home environment through interviewing parents and relate the information to the child's experiences at school.

Screening tests are best used when they assist the teacher in making curriculum decisions. The screening test can help identify strengths and weaknesses so teachers can plan meaningful experiences for children. However, this type of assessment information is not appropriate for grading, labeling, grouping, or retaining children (SECA, 1994).

Conclusion

In any discussion of developmentally appropriate practices for young children, the use and misuse of assessment is evident. General agreement seems to support authentic assessments, such as portfolios, which show development over time. Thus, limiting the use of standardized testing for very specific purposes.

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Planning instruction and communicating with parents can be done effectively through the use of portfolios. Portfolio assessment gives teachers information about children's development which can enable them to make plans for curriculum and instruction. Portfolios constitute a history of the child's development and can be used to communicate that information to parents and administrators. Parents have a clearer, fuller picture not only of their child's growth and development but how it occurred over time and within the school setting. Portfolio assessment has been proposed as an effective method for providing a rich picture of the development of individual children and for showing a child's growth over time (Diffily & Fleege, 1994).

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Authors' Notes

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